

The Focus of Ethics Is Human Action

DEFINITIONS OF ETHICS

Scholars often call ethics “moral philosophy.”¹ The previous chapter showed that ethics is a branch of classical philosophy dealing with morality. It is closely related to and depends on other branches of philosophy. As noted in the previous chapter, theories relating to the existence of an external and real physical world, and to the capacity of the human mind to acquire knowledge, affect ethics. It should not be surprising, then, to discover that there is no single definition of *ethics*. There are different definitions arising from the various theories discussed. These definitions have their roots in the two basic philosophies of realism and idealism, or objectivism and interpretivism.

The objectivist-based definitions are all similar; they are deontological definitions. The following are two objectivist definitions of ethics:

The normative standards of conduct derived from the philosophical and religious traditions of society.²

The attempt to state and evaluate principles by which ethical problems may be solved.³

The classical scholastic definition of ethics is similar. Scholastic philosophers see ethics as the philosophical science that directs or guides voluntary human actions according to ultimate principles discovered by human reason alone. According to this definition, ethics is the science that

relies on human reason to discover standards of conduct or morality that apply to all human beings. The previous chapter said that human reason alone has limits, and therefore it should not be surprising that these standards of morality also will have limitations.

The essential ingredient of the deontological definitions is that real, objective standards of morality exist for humans and that at least some of these standards can be discovered by human reason. Ethicists devote their energies to discovering such standards of conduct or codes of moral behavior. Organizations that have developed codes of ethics for their members, such as the American Medical Association and the American Society for Public Administration, subscribe to a deontological definition of ethics.

The interpretivist approach has a different definition of ethics. As discussed in the previous chapter, the interpretivist is an idealist who does not subscribe to the existence of a real, external world; even if he did, he would deny that human beings can have objective knowledge of it. For the interpretivist, a real world may or may not exist, and real, objective standards, laws or rules may or may not exist. So definitions from an interpretivist perspective are strictly teleological. The following are examples of interpretivist definitions of ethics:

Ethics introduces a radical kind of doubt into the everyday world. . . . Ethics looks at the future; it is concerned with the goodness and rightness of man's doing and making . . . it looks at the past for the sake of the future. . . . Ethics seeks to clarify the logic and the adequacy of the values that shape the world; it assesses the moral possibilities which are projected and portrayed in the social give-and-take. . . . Ethics is concerned with the intent morality in itself—with the moral quality of its orientation to the future and to relativism.⁴

The tasks of careful reflection several steps removed from the actual conduct of men concerning the assumptions and presumptions of the moral life.⁵

Cynthia McSwain and Orion White explain the teleological approach as follows: "Actors create meaning reflexively, through looking backward at their actions and interpreting them so as to build and maintain shared categories of common sense assumptions about 'what is going on,' and what is the correct way to behave."⁶ McSwain and White admit that the interpretivist definitions of ethics seem to imply ethical relativism. But as chapters 2 and 3 pointed out, this definition has strong roots in both ontology and epistemology.

Those who subscribe to the teleological definitions of ethics are not trying to discover or develop standards of morality for people. They are

attempting to interpret what meaning can be found in human actions and, through reflection, how right or wrong are these actions. Interpretivists may arrive at the same conclusion concerning the rightness or wrongness of a human action, but they do not derive their conclusions from objective rules, laws or standards.

Besides the above definitions is Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian definition: "Ethics at large may be defined as the art of directing men's actions to the greatest production of the greatest possible quantity of happiness on the part of those whose interest is in view. . . . Ethics . . . may be styled as the art of self-government."⁷ I address this definition later in this chapter.

Jonsen and Hellegers describe ethics as "a body of prescriptions and prohibitions, do's and don't's, that people consider to carry uncommon weight in their lives."⁸ They proceed to state that ethics involves more than this definition. It is "an academic discipline, a systematic set of propositions that constitute the intellectual instruments for the analysis of morality."⁹ This appears to be largely a deontological definition.

The common thread here is that ethics concentrates on *human actions or on the consequences of human actions*. From a deontological perspective, ethics teaches that we ought to perform good actions, and it provides us with rules for doing so. Yet the deontological approach does not tell us *how* to do good. In a sense, the deontological approach is similar to the "twelve commandments" developed by the American Society for Public Administration for its membership. It contains rules or "moral standards," but it does not guarantee that we will follow the rules any more than the American Society for Public Administration's Code of Ethics guarantees that the membership will act in accordance with those rules.¹⁰

From a teleological perspective, ethics also examines human actions and their consequences—not so much by applying absolute standards or rules, but by reflecting on their meaning and determining their rightness or wrongness depending on the situation, circumstances and intention of the actor.

DIVISIONS OF ETHICS

Ethics has two parts: general ethics and special ethics. *General ethics* develops general principles concerning the morality of human actions. *Special ethics* applies the general principles developed in general ethics to people's conduct toward themselves, other human beings, society and the state. The methodology is deductive, as explained in the previous chapter.

Special ethics deduces from general principles the morality of particular, specific actions. These actions can be those of individuals, public

administrators, legislators, physicians, businesspeople and the like. In arriving at the general principles, general ethics relies on experience and psychology. It sees humans as composite beings, composed of a body and a soul, endowed with speech with which to communicate and needs, some of which can be fulfilled. Through a combination of deductive reasoning and experience, ethics sees society as natural to humankind.

HUMAN ACTIONS

All these definitions of ethics suggest that it focuses on human actions and their morality. It is concerned with the morality of human behavior. But first it is important to separate human actions from their morality. The major focus of ethics is on human actions; this also happens to be the starting point for most legal systems. They are primarily interested in human actions and, following that, in their legality or illegality. Ethics, then, does not concern itself with the actions of animals. Furthermore, ethics focuses only on people's *deliberate* human actions, and not on undeliberate actions or actions done because of ignorance. The distinction here is between what philosophers call an *actus humanus* (deliberate human action) and an *actus hominis* (undeliberate action). What is it that makes an action human? What are the principal ingredients of a human action? Lawyers also focus on this issue. Deontologists use criteria to arrive at the notion of a human action while teleologists reflect on the merits of a particular action. Both may arrive at the same conclusion, but they also may not.

Scholastic philosophers maintain that three requirements must be concurrently present for any action to be human: (1) There must be some *knowledge* involved; (2) There must be *voluntariness* present; (3) The action must be *freely* done.¹¹ St. Thomas Aquinas discussed these three elements at length in *Summa Theologica*, Question 18.¹² If any one of these elements is not present, the action is not a human action, and therefore it is not a fitting subject for ethics.

Knowledge is an essential requirement for an action to be human. As discussed in psychology, we cannot will anything unless we first know it. So knowledge of some kind is an absolute for an action to be human.

Besides knowledge, the action must be voluntary—that is, it must proceed from the will. In chapter 3, under the discussion on psychology, the will was defined as a faculty that enables us to incline or strive after an object apprehended as good. Some actions proceed directly from the will—such as consenting—or indirectly through other faculties commanded by the will—such as thinking, seeing or walking. The will controls

the performance of external actions—the will is the *cause* of our actions.¹³ On the other hand, if someone places a gun in my hand and pulls the trigger, it is obvious that my will does not control or cause that action, and therefore the shooting is not voluntary and not human.

The third element in a human action is that it must be freely done. Psychology discussed in chapter 3 established that human beings have free will—that is, the capacity to act or not to act or to act in one way as opposed to another. Free will means that human beings have choices.¹⁴ Although some human actions are voluntary, in that the actor carries out the action, not every voluntary action is free. Every free action is voluntary in that the actor without restraint carried out the action, but not every voluntary action is free. That means that while an actor may be the cause of an action, the actor was operating under conditions such as force or fear that prevented the action from being freely done. The actor was unable to exercise choice; therefore, the action, although voluntarily done, was not a free action.

The above three conditions have close connections. *Voluntariness* includes anything that proceeds from the will; therefore, it includes not only direct actions but also omissions and the effects of both actions and omissions. In addition, the actor must have some knowledge of the end or purpose of the action, omission or effect of either. This makes an action different from a mere wish or volition, which is not an action *per se*.

How much knowledge of the end or purpose of an action must an actor have? Scholastic philosophers argue that the actor must have “sufficient” knowledge of the end or purpose of the action for the action to be human. St. Thomas Aquinas said: “Now in order that a thing be done for an end, some knowledge of the end is necessary. . . . The voluntary is defined not only as having a principle within the agent, but also as implying knowledge.”¹⁵ For example, a dog has some knowledge of its actions. If a dog sees a bone, she probably will chase it. The dog has what philosophers call “imperfect knowledge” that makes her action a *spontaneous act*. On the other hand, if the actor lacks all knowledge of the end or purpose of his act, the action is a *natural act*. It appears that trees and plants as they grow have no knowledge of their purpose, and so the actions of growing are natural. An action is involuntary when the actor lacks all knowledge of the purpose, or acts with knowledge but not according to an act of the will. The person taking another’s umbrella without knowledge illustrates this point. The action is involuntary.

Another factor involving knowledge, voluntariness and freedom is the distinction between what is directly voluntary and what is voluntary in

cause. An action is *directly voluntary* when the actor wills the action for himself or as a means to an end. A student can will to take a course in public administration or will to obtain an MPA, which makes a particular course a means to earning an MPA. On the other hand, *voluntary in cause* means that the action is not directly willed for its own sake but arises from another action directly willed. An action is voluntary in cause if the actor foresees that it will result from another action directly willed. For example, a fighter pilot may directly will the dropping of bombs over a military target, but may see indirectly that the action (bombing a military target) may result in killing innocent civilians. The latter action may be voluntary in cause, depending on what the pilot foresaw at the time of his direct actions. The test here is what the actor foresaw. In reality, it makes little difference whether the act is voluntary now (direct) or voluntary because of a previously willed action (voluntary in cause) because of foresight. The same principle applies to an action done with reluctance or only because of circumstances. The test again is what the actor foresaw at the time of the action. In practice, voluntary-in-cause actions tend to be less voluntary than actions directly willed.¹⁶

IMPEDIMENTS TO HUMAN ACTION

This discussion limits the number of actions performed by human beings that can genuinely be human actions. If any of the three conditions is absent, the action is not human and is not subject to examination in ethics. Civil law, however, may not treat the action the same way. Prosecuting attorneys tend to see *all* actions as human actions, and therefore subject to the scrutiny of the law. Defense attorneys, on the other hand, tend to show that actions of defendants were not human actions and therefore the defendant is not culpable. The three criteria imply that there may be other factors that render actions nonhuman and therefore not subject to scrutiny in ethics. There are several such factors, some of which St. Thomas Aquinas addressed.¹⁷

Ignorance

Since knowledge is an important requirement in assessing whether an action is human or not, it is obvious that factors interfering with knowledge also interfere with whether an action is human. The first such factor is ignorance. Ignorance is the absence of knowledge in a subject capable of having knowledge, or lack of knowledge in a subject who should have knowledge. An animal cannot be ignorant because of its inability to have

human knowledge. But a public manager can be ignorant if she lacks knowledge of managerial principles or ethics in public organizations.

Several types of ignorance have ramifications on whether actions are human or not. The first is the distinction between *ignorance of law* and *ignorance of fact*. In the first case, the actor is ignorant—does not know—that the law exists. Legal prosecutors tend to argue that once the lawful authority promulgates a law, we must presume that subjects are aware of the existence of that law. Therefore, ignorance of the law is a myth. But in ethics, ignorance of the existence of the law through no fault of the actor does diminish the humanness of the action; if the actor violates the law through such ignorance, the action is not a human action. Ignorance of fact, on the other hand, means that the actor is aware of the existence of the law but uncertain or ignorant about the nature of his action or the circumstances in which he is operating—the actor is unsure that his action is violating the law. If there is no doubt in the actor's mind that the action, which actually is a violation of the law, is not a violation of the law, that particular action does not violate the law. A court of law may see the same action differently, but ethics is not just law—it is broader than the law.

A more critical element of ignorance is the distinction between invincible and vincible ignorance. *Invincible ignorance* means that the actor does not even suspect that she is ignorant or that she is in doubt about the nature of the action but does not have access through common sense to dispel the doubt. *Vincible ignorance*, on the other hand, means that the actor can through the use of ordinary care or common sense dispel the doubt.

Invincible ignorance destroys the voluntariness of an action. The actor does not know or cannot know the truth about his action, and so invincible ignorance destroys one essential ingredient of a human action—knowledge. Actions done through invincible ignorance are not human actions, and the actors are not responsible for the consequences of these actions. (Courts of law may take a different view of these actions.)

Vincible ignorance does not destroy voluntariness because the actor in these circumstances adverts to her ignorance and does not take sufficient steps to dispel the ignorance. Such a person must accept the consequences of the action. An action performed because of vincible ignorance is voluntary in cause and, as stated above, tends to lessen voluntariness or make the actor less responsible than if she directly willed the action.

Passion

Passions influence human action. Psychology studies human passions in detail. Passions are powerful emotions or appetites springing from a

pretense of something perceived as good or evil; they are usually accompanied by bodily changes. Passions include human appetites, such as anger, grief, love, hatred or greed. Thus a grieving person often sheds tears and makes grieving sounds.

Some passions precede an act of the will and cause the will to act. Sometimes, the actor deliberately arouses his passions. If the passions that precede an action are not deliberately aroused, such as a sudden rage or a fit of anger, they help to increase the onward movement of the will to act, but simultaneously diminish the freedom of the will. The action is still a human action to the extent that freedom of the will can be measured. If, on the other hand, we do not cause a particular passion and that passion destroys the use of reason, it also destroys the voluntariness of the action and thus renders it an *actus hominis*.

When an actor deliberately arouses a passion before acting, it is obvious that the voluntary nature of the action also increases. If that passion should destroy the use of reason, the deliberate arousal of the passion is a direct action and any subsequent action is voluntary in cause or an effect of causing the passion to emerge. An example is a person deliberately causing herself to become enraged, and as a result killing another person. The killing is voluntary in cause and the actor is guilty of homicide to the extent that she foresaw the killing.

Fear

Fear may influence human action to the extent of rendering it non-human, somewhat human or totally human. Fear is mental trepidation or an emotional reaction arising from an impending danger. There are two kinds of fear: (1) grave fear, or that which would affect a person of ordinary courage in the same circumstances; (2) light fear, or that which would not affect a person of ordinary courage in the same situation. Fear may come from sources outside ourselves or from within. It can be inflicted justly or unjustly—justly when inflicted by a person with the right to inflict it and in the proper manner, as happens when a judge acts; or unjustly when inflicted either by a person without authority or in an improper manner.

The principle governing fear is that whatever fear (usually grave fear) is so strong as to destroy a person's freedom of choice also destroys the voluntariness of that action. The action is not a human action. If the fear (usually light fear) does not destroy the person's freedom but only diminishes it, the subsequent action is voluntary in proportion to the amount of liberty the person had.

Violence

Violence can influence the degree to which actions are human or not. Violence is external physical force exerted on a person. When a person offers all the resistance he can, actions done in these circumstances are unfree and therefore not human actions. If he does not offer as much resistance as possible, the actions performed may be less free and so human in proportion to the resistance not exerted.

Habit

Habit can influence the nature of human action. Habit is a quality acquired through frequent repetition that enables the subject to act easily and promptly. It is an inclination that is also difficult to remove. Good habits are virtues and bad habits are vices. The issue here is the influence of habits on voluntariness. That a person acquires a habit shows voluntariness at work. But when we acquire habits our individual actions, such as smoking, may become less voluntary because of a lack of advertence to a particular action. However, if a person acquiring a habit foresees the results, good or bad, that does not lessen the voluntariness of subsequent actions. These actions are at least voluntary in cause and are subject to the same assessment.

Temperament

Temperament may influence voluntariness. Temperament is the sum of a person's natural propensities as opposed to character, which is the collection of a person's acquired propensities, such as habits. Temperament and character may sometimes lessen the voluntariness of actions, but never destroy it.

Pathological States

There are many pathological states that may interfere with voluntariness, in that they blur knowledge and weaken the will. In criminal cases, attorneys pay great attention to these mental states. Amentia, or arrested mental development caused by injury or disease, and dementia, or disorder in a once developed mind, clearly affect the voluntariness of human actions because they impair knowledge.

Insanity, psychoneurosis, psychosis, schizophrenia and the like may also impact on the voluntariness of human actions. But there is always a

question of whether these conditions sufficiently removed human reason to render the action nonhuman. It may be commonplace to plead insanity in murder trials, but the ethics of the actions focuses solely on how much knowledge and reason the actor had when the murder was done.

Another issue is sleep walking. If a sleepwalker kills another person or commits a crime, is he guilty and to what extent? From what has been said, if the sleepwalker is completely asleep and lacks all knowledge, voluntariness or freedom, the action is not a human action; it falls into the *actus hominis* category. So it is not an action that ethics can judge. However, if there were some reason or knowledge involved, ethics would assess the nature of the action based on that factor.

Other conditions that impact on the voluntariness of human actions include drugs and alcohol. These substances can impair human reasoning and knowledge. Many people raise the issue of the guilt or innocence of the intoxicated person who, while driving home after drinking, kills an innocent person. Is this person guilty of both drunkenness and murder? The answer goes back to the distinction between direct voluntariness and voluntary in cause. It depends on what the intoxicated person foresaw at the time of her drinking. It is a question of what that person knew at the time, not before starting to drink and not afterward.

SUMMARY

This chapter has focused on definitions of ethics and particularly on human actions as the starting point of ethics. It should be clear that the conditions involved in defining human actions limit the number of actions that come under the scrutiny of ethics. While civil law may look on both human actions and *actus hominum* as legitimate targets for scrutiny under the law, ethics limits its view to solely human actions. If the action is not human, ethics does not consider the action from a moral perspective. The next chapter focuses on the morality of human actions.

NOTES

1. William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1963). Also, Daniel Callahan and H. Tristram Englehardt, *The Roots of Ethics—Science, Religion, and Values* (New York: Plenum Press, 1981).
2. Cyril L. Means, *The Ethical Imperative* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970).
3. W. T. Jones, *Approaches to Ethics: Representative Selections from Classical Times to the Present*, Third Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977).
4. Winter Gibson, *Elements for a Social Ethic: The Role of Social Sciences in Public Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 124–41.

5. James M. Gustafson, *Theology and Christian Ethics*. Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1974.

6. Cynthia J. McSwain, and Orion F. White, Jr., "The Case of Lying, Cheating, and Stealing—Personal Development as Ethical Guidance for Managers," *Administration and Society* 18, no. 4 (February 1987).

7. Jeremy Bentham, *The Principles of Morals and Legislation* (New York: Hofner, 1948), pp. 311–12.

8. Albert R. Jonsen and Andre E. Hellegers, "Conceptual Foundations for an Ethics of Medical Care," in *Ethics for Health Care*, Lawrence R. Tancredi, ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1974), p. 4.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

10. "Code of Ethics," American Society for Public Administration, Washington, D.C., April 8, 1984.

11. Anton Pegis, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Volume One (New York: Random House, 1945), pp. 317–33.

12. Anton Pegis, ed., *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Volume Two (New York: Random House, 1945), pp. 777–85.

13. *Ibid.*, Vol. Two, pp. 786–92.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 226–27.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 228–30.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 230–38.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 232–38.

This page intentionally left blank

The Morality of Human Action

DEFINITION OF MORALITY

Ethics focuses not only on human action but also on its morality. Once we decide that an action is human, then that action becomes subject matter for ethics. It is an important function of ethics to figure out whether particular human actions are moral or not. Morality involves the examination of human action to decide if it is good, bad or indifferent—to figure out if it is right or wrong, good or bad.

Psychology has established that humans have free will. People have the capacity to choose one action and reject another. People have the capacity to choose what is right and reject what is wrong or vice versa. Free will plays a vital role in human action and in its morality.

Ontology involves the nature of causality, the difference between cause and effect and the Principle of Sufficient Reason. Epistemology further elaborated on judgments arrived at by generalization. By combining these two studies we can say that if we know the nature or purpose of something or some being, we can fairly accurately decide what kinds of activities are good or bad for that particular thing. For example, if we know what the nature or purpose of a knife is, we can fairly accurately figure out what activities are good or bad for a knife so that it can achieve its purpose. If we know what activities a being does, we can fairly accurately decide the purpose of that being.

Based on this approach, we can say that a thing is good when it is in harmony with or fits a nature. Rightness involves the means to an end—an

action is right when it fits a particular end. To decide the morality of human actions, ethics must first determine the end or purpose of human actions—the ultimate end of these actions. *End* or *purpose* means the reason for which a person performs an action. Some human actions can have many and different purposes, including immediate and ultimate ones.¹ Scholars have different views of what constitutes the ultimate purpose of human actions.

THE PURPOSE OF HUMAN ACTION

Epicureans, discussed in chapter 2, held that humankind's happiness consists in obtaining all the pleasure that life can offer. The ultimate purpose of human action is pleasure. This is the "eat, drink and be merry" code of ethics.

Another group of philosophers, the Stoics, claimed that the highest good a human can acquire is the cultivation of the mind or control over knowledge. Humans can attain perfect knowledge in this life; the ultimate purpose of human action is to cultivate the human mind or acquire knowledge.

Materialism or communism maintains that people's happiness consists in acquiring material goods. The acquisition of wealth is or should be the ultimate purpose of human action.

Humanism holds that the ultimate end of human action is in achieving prosperity and progress for the human race. This is equivalent to the theory of economic plenty. Other forms of humanism are narrower, in that they see the ultimate end of human action as achieving prosperity and progress for a nation. This can lead to extreme nationalism. Humanitarianism sees the ultimate end of human action as service, whether it be service to humankind in general, to a nation, to an organization or to a group. The highest good people can achieve is to serve.

Scholastics base their theory of the ultimate end of human actions on philosophy. From theodicy, they claim that a supreme being exists and that humans ultimately depend on and can be completely satisfied only by association with the supreme being.² From psychology they claim that humans are composed of a body and a spiritual soul, and the spiritual soul is the link with the supreme being. Only something that is all good (excluding evil), desirable and perpetual can satisfy people's insatiable appetite for happiness. No created goods (goods of the body, mind or material) can completely satisfy these appetites after which the human will strives, as psychology establishes.³ Scholastics argue that, while beginning to attain the perfect good starts in this life, perfect beatitude does not occur until

another life or a life after death. Psychology establishes that a person's soul continues to exist after death, and perfect beatitude ultimately rests with a person's soul in a future life of association with the supreme being.

Chapter 2 suggested that we can consider human action from various points of view. Physiology considers the physical makeup of human action. Psychology focuses on the activities of the mind, as does epistemology. Ethics examines the purpose of action, especially ultimate end. Finally, *morality* is the conformity or lack of conformity of a human action with the actor's purpose. Morality is the relationship of action to purpose; it is a quality applied to human action, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MORAL GOOD AND MORAL EVIL

The same physical action may at different times be morally good or morally evil. For example, driving through a red light may be morally evil. But if authorities remove the light, the same physical act of driving through the intersection may be morally good. What makes the difference between a morally good action and a morally evil one? Does the difference rest in some extrinsic circumstance, such as a law or a red light, or in some intrinsic circumstance or nature of the action itself? The fundamental question is, Are all human actions right or wrong because of some extrinsic circumstances, such as rules of law, or are at least some human actions *intrinsically evil*? There are different schools of thought on this point.

Divine positivists claim that actions are good or evil only because God has freely commanded them to be so. They say God, who has forbidden lying, could just as easily have forbidden telling the truth. Positive laws of God determine the morality of human actions, therefore these theorists are *divine positivists*.

The problem with this theory is that it is difficult to comprehend how God could command murder to be right and moral at one time and at another time to be immoral or evil. This is contrary to the common experience of people of all times and of all places, who have determined that murder is evil. If the divine positivist position is correct, ethics serves no useful purpose because human reason is incapable of distinguishing between right and wrong—only God can do that.

Human positivists, on the other hand, hold that the difference between right and wrong arose from tribal custom or because of education or social influences. Jean-Jacques Rousseau held that actions are good when the state commands them and evil when the state forbids them. He was an evolutionary positivist. Thomas Huxley taught that the notions of moral

good and moral evil have changed. Polygamy among the Jewish people was once lawful and moral, but today it is immoral.

It is true that education and cultural development help clarify our perception of what is right and wrong. They provide a better understanding of ethics. But education and cultural development alone cannot explain the universal agreement that certain actions, such as murder, are morally evil.

Scholastic philosophers maintain that there is an intrinsic difference between good and evil. They say that at least some human actions are *intrinsically evil and some actions are intrinsically good*. According to the scholastics, actions that lead a man toward his end are good and actions that lead a man away from his end are evil. There are actions of both kinds. Therefore some actions are intrinsically good and others are intrinsically evil, with an intrinsic difference between good and evil.⁴

In support of this position, the scholastics point to these universal judgments that some actions are morally right and others are morally wrong. While these philosophers cannot agree on the morality of all actions, or perhaps on much of anything else, they have agreed that some actions such as murder, robbery or treachery are morally wrong by their very nature. They may not agree on the number and kind of human actions that fit into the intrinsic evil category. For example, Patrick Buchanan, in the *Washington Times*, said: "Cardinal O'Connor has done nothing but assert Catholic doctrine on homosexuality and abortion; i.e., both are intrinsically wrong."⁵ Although Buchanan cited the Bible and not ethics as the source of his claim, he illustrates the point made here that sometimes at least there is an intrinsic difference between a good action and an evil action. But how does a person decide the difference between the two? What constitutes the essence of morality?

THE ESSENCE OF MORALITY

Morality concerns the fundamental reason why some actions are good and others are evil. It is a test to find out what acts are good and what acts are evil. It is a search for criteria to assess the goodness or badness of human action. There are several schools of thought on this issue.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarians claim that the test of goodness or badness of a human action is the usefulness of the action. This is largely a teleological theory. An action is morally good if it is useful and morally evil if it is not.

There are two kinds of utilitarians, who differ only on the notion of usefulness. Individual utilitarianism, or hedonism, originated with Epicurus and is discussed in chapter 2. It also was popular in France during the nineteenth century. It holds that an action is intrinsically good if it is useful for or brings pleasure to the individual. An action is morally evil if it destroys or diminishes a person's pleasure. Actions that initially bring pleasure but subsequently bring pain or punishment are good or evil according to their most pronounced effect. For example, a person drinking alcohol may derive certain pleasure, but a subsequent hangover may bring pain or driving-while-intoxicated arrest may result in punishment. The most pronounced effect determines the morality of the action of drinking alcohol.

Social utilitarianism, or altruism, holds that an action is morally good if it is useful for the community: the greatest good for the greatest number. Actions are good or evil insofar as they advance or hinder the happiness or good of the community. Advocates of this theory include John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham, discussed in chapter 2.

Herbert Spencer combined these two theories. He stated that an action is good if it brings pleasure to the individual and simultaneously promotes the good of the community. Actions are good if they increase life, but evil if they decrease life. Spencer admitted there may be conflicts between what is good for the individual and what is good for the community, because we have not yet evolved sufficiently to achieve perfect harmony between the individual and the community. Until the human race has sufficiently evolved, we must compromise, deciding the morality of the actions involved.

The main criticism of utilitarianism in general is that it often promotes selfishness. It also assumes without proof that people can satisfy their needs for the perpetual good in their lives. Individual utilitarianism provides no advance guarantee that an action will bring pleasure or pain; often a person must act before experiencing pleasure or pain. If pleasure is the sole criterion of moral goodness, every act, including stealing, murder, and so on, can be moral. The same argument applies to social utilitarianism—that is, every act done for the good of the community is moral. Social utilitarianism also destroys the dignity of the individual and makes people cogs in the wheel of human progress.

Intuitionism

Intuitionism claims we know that ethical principles are valid and universal by intuition. Human beings have a special sense faculty that enables them to perceive directly what is right and what is wrong. Just as human beings have a sense of taste by which they can distinguish what is

bitter from what is sweet, so too they have a moral faculty to enable them to distinguish what is right from what is wrong. What brings pleasure to this moral faculty is good and what brings displeasure is evil. Another version of intuitionism claims that the ultimate criterion of morality is common sense. People have principles that they form instinctively but cannot explain. These principles enable them to instinctively or intuitively feel what is good or what is evil.

The main problem with intuitionism is that it attempts only to tell us how we know *what* is good and not *what* is good. It offers no proof that we have a moral faculty or instinct that tells us what is right and what is wrong. It is true that human beings have consciences, but consciences do not work automatically and are not instincts.

Rationalism

Moral rationalism is the theory of Immanuel Kant, discussed in chapters 2 and 3. It is a deontological theory. Kant disagreed with the two theories just discussed. He claimed that no action is moral if it is done for pleasure or any other motive than duty or respect for the law. In practical reasoning, human beings have among the twelve *a priori* gates what Kant called the Categorical Imperative. This Categorical Imperative orders a person to do good and avoid evil. Acts are good or bad as out of respect for the Categorical Imperative or not. An act is good according to the motive of the actor; the only motive that makes an act good is respect for duty or law. Acts are good, according to Kant, if they can be universalized—that is, we should act in the way everybody else in the same circumstances would act. The essential element in determining morality is human reason. Thus, the ultimate test of goodness or badness of human actions is the Categorical Imperative of practical reason.

The criticism of Kant's theories in chapters 2 and 3 applies here. There is no evidence that the Categorical Imperative exists. If it does exist, it would not explain the morality of actions taken when no law exists to command such actions. Kant's canonization of human reason as the sole and infallible interpreter of morality is flawed, as the philosophical theories discussed here and in chapters 2 and 3 attest.

Scholasticism

Scholastic philosophers maintain that the essence of morality lies in human nature considered in its totality—that is, in all its parts and all its relationships, including those with other human beings, the universe and

the supreme being. Human beings have a rational nature, as psychology established. Once we know the nature of something, we can come to know its purpose and what will help it to attain it. For humans, it is proximately a rational nature that determines what is good and what is bad. Borrowing from theodicy, the scholastics go one step further and argue that the decision on the morality of human action rests with the supreme being, on whom humans ultimately depend.⁶

The criteria for assessing the morality of human action are a fundamental issue that has intrigued philosophers. Philosophers have focused on and put forward several different criteria for assessing morality, but a single criterion of pleasure and the existence of a Categorical Imperative are insufficient explanations of morality. Scholastic theory is more comprehensive. It considers several criteria, including the body and soul, the intellect and senses, human relationships with various entities and the circumstances in which humans find themselves. It is reasonable to consider all elements in determining what is right and what is wrong. Both the deontological and teleological schools of thought probably concur on this point. Yet the teleological school might consider departing from this theory if it limits the application of criteria to an action before commission, as opposed to concomitant or subsequent application.

DETERMINANTS OF MORALITY

What parts of a human action should we examine to decide if the action concurs with human nature, as discussed in the previous section? There are three parts to every action that we should examine: the object of the action, the circumstances in which the action was performed and the end or purpose of the act. Sometimes these three components are the only practical criteria a public administrator will have to decide the morality of a public action.⁷ Essentially this is the basis of the teleological approach.

Object of a Human Action

The object of an action is the first part of any action in a morality assessment. The object of any action is its essence.⁸ It is that which makes an action be what it is and not something else. Every action has an object. The object distinguishes the act from every other act. That object can be something good, bad or indifferent—that is, neither good nor bad. Lying and telling the truth are examples of two actions that are distinguished from each other according to moral criteria. The following principles apply to the object of every action.

1. An action whose object is bad by its very nature will remain bad and nothing can improve it—neither circumstances, nor purpose, nor intention. A lie, defined as speaking contrary to what is in the speaker's mind, remains a lie despite the purpose or circumstance involved. Purpose and circumstance do not make it anything (another object) except a lie.
2. An action that is good may become bad because of circumstances or purpose. For example, telling the truth is a good act. By telling the truth, when silence would suffice, to destroy another person's good name or character makes the good act of telling the truth a morally bad act because of the speaker's purpose or intention.
3. An action that is indifferent (neither good nor bad) may become good or bad because of circumstances or purpose. Walking may be an indifferent act. But walking into a store to steal becomes a morally evil action because of the purpose.

Circumstances of a Human Action

Circumstances are those qualities that make an abstract act concrete and individual. Circumstances include such things as the act being done at a particular time, in a particular place, by a particular agent, in a particular manner. Moral circumstances, not physical, are the criteria for assessing the goodness or badness of a human action.⁹ Moral circumstances may increase the goodness or badness of a human action. To strike another person in self-defense is one thing; to strike another without any provocation or justification is another matter.

Some moral circumstances are aggravating when they increase the goodness or badness of an action. Thus, stealing from a homeless person is an *aggravating* circumstance that increases the badness of an already bad act. Circumstances are *extenuating* when they decrease the amount of badness of an action. For example, to steal \$10 from the Chase Manhattan Bank is not as bad as stealing \$10 from a homeless person, but it is still an evil act. Moral circumstances are *specifying* when they make an indifferent act become good or bad, or when they give a new kind of goodness or badness to an action. For example, taking money from a till is an indifferent act. If the money belongs to the taker, the act is all right. But if the money belongs to another person, it is an evil, immoral act.

Some philosophers maintain that circumstances are the sole criterion for judging the morality of a human action. Joseph Fletcher, in particular, reflected this position.¹⁰ To a certain extent, subscribers to the teleological theory (interpretivists) may appear to focus more closely on the circumstances of an action, to the extent that they strive to understand or give

meaning to a human action. However, interpretivists need not limit their consideration of morality to mere circumstances; they also can, as stated above, consider the nature of the action and its purpose.

The most difficult problem in situation ethics is that it often makes morality subjective and relative. There is nothing to prevent two persons in same circumstances from giving two diametrically opposite meanings to the same action. This implies that an action that is morally good for one person is morally evil for another. Although interpretivists do subscribe to human reason as an interpreter of human actions, the person who focuses on the situation alone cannot be sure of the morality of at least some actions.

The End or Purpose of a Human Action

The end of a human action is the purpose the person had in mind while doing the act. It is the intention. People can have only one purpose or have a variety of purposes in doing a particular act.¹¹ We can deduce certain principles based on the purpose in mind when performing the act.

1. An action that is indifferent because of its object may become good or bad because of the purpose. For example, jogging in itself is an indifferent act. When done to maintain good health, it becomes a good act. When done to arrive at a place where the person commits theft or murder, it becomes an immoral action.
2. An action that is good because of its object may become more good or less good or even bad because of the purpose. For example, to give a donation to a homeless person is a good action. If you give the donation just to get rid of the person, it is still a good action, but not as good as in the first case. If you give the donation to lure the homeless person into doing something evil or immoral for you, the donation becomes an immoral act.
3. An action that is evil by its object may become more wrong or perhaps less wrong, but never good by its purpose. For instance, telling a lie is morally wrong. But telling a lie to defame another person is more wrong. Telling a lie "to get out of trouble" or to protect the interests of another person is still lying and still wrong, but less wrong because of the purpose. A good end does not justify a bad means.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF MORAL ACTIONS

The foregoing discussion attributed morality to human actions—that is, actions over which the actor has control. A consequence of these factors is that moral acts are imputed to the doer. The effects of an action are

attributable to the doer as the cause of the act. When the actor physically does the act, the action is physically imputed to that person—the person is responsible for his or her action.¹² If the actor does not perform the act but causes another to do it, the first person is still morally responsible for the consequences of the act to the degree that he or she foresaw those consequences. Whatever increases, lessens or destroys the liberty and knowledge that are essential for a moral act also increases, lessens or destroys the responsibility of the actor. On the other hand, the actions of other people may be imputed to us if we have helped, encouraged or persuaded them to do something or if we have remained silent when these people clearly needed advice.

When are we responsible for the effect of our actions? To be responsible for an evil effect we must advert at least vaguely to the fact that the action is bad. If we so advert, we are presumed to have willed the effect. For example, a hunter sees an object but is unsure whether it is a man or a deer. The hunter adverts at least vaguely to what the consequences of firing a shot may be. The hunter shoots anyhow, and therefore the presumption is that the hunter willed the effect of his action. On the other hand, for a good effect to be imputed, the actor must advert to the good effect and intend it. For example, after a presentation by a speaker on government travel regulations, a member of the audience decides to reimburse the government for overreimbursement. If the speaker never considered—much less intended—the good effect, the speaker is not responsible for it.

ACTS OF DOUBLE EFFECT

Some actions have two effects—good and bad. How does someone decide the morality of such actions? Ethicists provide a few general principles to help decide the morality of acts of double effect. They are:

1. The action that produces the two effects must be either good or indifferent—that is, not intrinsically wrong.
2. The good effect must be immediate—that is, not obtained through the evil effect.
3. The intention or purpose must be good.
4. There must be a proportionately good reason or cause for performing the action in the first place.

The most difficult problem with acts of double effect is to figure out whether the evil effect caused the good effect. One way of resolving this

problem is by asking the following question: If you take away the evil effect, does the good effect remain? If the good effect remains, the evil effect did not cause it. If there is doubt and it appears that the good effect also disappears, it is important to discover if the good effect has been unduly subordinated to the evil effect.

Acts of double effect are of great interest to most people. They often cite the example of the pregnant woman about to deliver, whose physician has diagnosed serious medical complications. In the physician's opinion, it may not be possible to save both lives. Many have claimed that this example allows the physician "to kill the mother to save the baby." Others have said that the physician may "kill the baby to save the mother."

Examples of this kind are somewhat rare. Every physician will do his or her utmost to save both lives. But if, finally, it is a question of one life versus the other, the following principle holds. *It is lawful (moral) to perform an act of two effects (one life saved, the other lost) provided the actor (physician) intends the good effect although the actor foresees that the evil effect is possible and perhaps probable.* The actor does not intend the evil effect. In the case of the pregnant woman, the physician may perform a surgical procedure intending to save the woman's life (good effect), but from which procedure the physician foresees that death of the unborn infant (evil effect) will result. However, the physician does not intend this evil effect.

The good purpose—saving the pregnant woman's life—is the primary effect, and the physician does not intend the foreseen and probable evil effect. This principle may not seem to comply with the condition that the good effect is not obtained through the evil effect, but on reflection it does. If we remove the evil effect—the death of the fetus—the good effect remains. The surgical procedure is not the evil effect; it is an indifferent act, neither good nor bad in itself. But the surgical procedure causes two effects, one that the physician intends and the other he or she does not intend.

There are several actions that potentially have double effects. One is hunger strike, sometimes embarked upon to secure a country's liberty and independence but with possible death of the striker foreseen. Police officers often encounter situations of double effect, where their primary mission is to save people in danger but foresee the potential loss of their own lives. Military fighter pilots encounter situations of double effect in times of war. Likewise, public administrators and politicians too frequently find themselves confronted by circumstances where their actions may result in double effects. Often there are no laws or regulations on what to

do, except the nature of the action, the circumstances in which they find themselves and their action's purpose.

Laws and regulations provide important guidance to all public administrators in determining what is ethical or moral. The next chapter focuses on these laws and regulations. Every person, too, has a conscience, and the next chapter also considers what conscience is and how it applies the principles outlined in this chapter, as well as the principles of law, to every human action.

NOTES

1. Anton C. Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Volume Two (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 274.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 84–87, 359–65.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 257–58, 84ff.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 318.
5. *Washington Times*, December 18, 1989. "The Desecration of St. Patrick's."
6. Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 228–29.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 322. See also Albert R. Jonsen and Andre E. Hellegers, "Conceptual Foundations for a Ethics of Medical Care," in *Ethics for Health Care*, Laurence R. Tancredi, ed. (Washington, D.C.: National Academy of Sciences, 1974), pp. 10–11.
8. Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 319–20.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 320–21.
10. Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (New York: Westminster, 1966).
11. Pegis, *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, pp. 274–75.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 359–65.